

Flower Pop

In the studio with Polly Apfelbaum

Polly Apfelbaum is best known for her “fallen paintings”—stunning compositions made from vibrantly colored pieces of dyed, synthetic fabric that she places directly on the floor. For the past three years, she has been working with Durham Press, a workshop in a nineteenth-century schoolhouse in idyllic Bucks County, Pennsylvania. There she has focused on woodblock monoprints, typically spending two weeks at a time in residence, commuting from her home in Princeton with her dog Wills.

When she started this latest woodblock monoprint project, Apfelbaum was no stranger to printmaking—or Durham Press, where she’d made screenprints, etchings, and a woodblock print in the past. However, according to Jean-Paul Russell, who owns the press with Ann Marshall, “Those were all more typical, long-winded printmaking projects that lasted upward of a year. But

Polly works more freely. We realized we should make monoprints with her.”

Apfelbaum’s approach to woodblock printing is anything but traditional. For one thing, she doesn’t carve into the block. Durham Press staff members carved the maple plywood blocks, in their woodworking shop, from hundreds of flower doodles that Polly drew on acetate. Russell refined the doodles into more graphic images so they could be cut easily into woodblock forms. Apfelbaum uses the blocks to create shapes of pure, unmodeled color, arranging them on the paper much like she places her dyed fabric pieces on the floor of a gallery.

“The way this project unfolded makes more sense with how I work. The process was intuitive,” Apfelbaum says. As the team kept experimenting, they worked their way up to about four-hundred carved woodblocks, and eventually experimented



on a larger scale, producing monumental prints made on 80-by-80 inch squares of Hiromi handmade DHM-11 triple thick Japanese paper, which became the “Love Park” series. “In my installation work, I like big. The monoprints grew very naturally. We kept upping the ante,” Apfelbaum says, laughing. “These are really object oriented, thanks to the wonderful, very physical paper. We reacted to it and we pounded the hell out of it.” Some of the prints feature stark palettes of grays and blacks, and are very ordered, almost patterned; others are made with eye-popping pigments and feature the flower shapes in much freer compositions.

For her most recent monoprints, realized last summer, she collaborated with a team of seven printmakers. At the beginning of each day, they would spend an hour inking up woodblocks, with no set plan of how they would use them. They started with eighty woodblocks, using about forty colors. Apfelbaum would simply place the blocks on the Hiromi paper. Then the team would press the prints, using a hydraulic press. Some composi-



Polly Apfelbaum working with assistant printer Jason Depew at Durham Press. All images courtesy Durham Press



constantly inking the striped blocks. Apfelbaum would immediately pick up the blocks and apply them to the paper. Once again, a hydraulic press was used to make the monoprint. “We had to ink up fast to accommodate the spontaneity of the



tions from this first series, called “Baby Love” (each 25 x 25 in.), are as fresh and as carefully arranged as a bridesmaid’s nosegay, or as random as a bouquet of just-picked wildflowers.

Apfelbaum says she realizes in hindsight that the recurring flower theme dates back nearly twenty years in her work. In 1989, she doodled versions of flowers in an Andy Warhol print, *SAS Passenger Ticket* (1968), and had them recreated in wood for a 107-by-168-by-5 ½ inch sculptural piece called *Daisy Chain*. The work, which lay on the floor, consisted of two rectangular blocks, each carved with thirty-two of Warhol’s flowers.

But flowers aren’t the only recurring imagery in Apfelbaum’s latest prints. She has also started playing with more abstract stripes. The series consists of compositions of ½-inch-wide stripes and features a spectrum of up to eighty colors—some of which they mixed as the printmakers went along—and is printed in different sizes: 25 by 22 inches, 47 by 98 inches, and 80 by 80 inches. The Durham team laid out rollers on tables, with five or six people



process,” says Russell.

The experiment opened up a new vocabulary for Apfelbaum, and helped the artist return to her creative roots. “It allowed me to loosen up the flowers, and the stripes made me realize that the relationship of my work to drawing is important,” she says. She was also able to expand her iconography and revisit conceptual aspects of her work. “Flowers and stripes are clichés, but I like very simple forms. They’re ubiquitous. In my work, abstraction has always been related to Pop,” she explains. “The stripes were Pop stalks to the Pop flowers. But they’re also related to other histories, such as artist Gene Davis’s abstractions—and the graphic design of [clothing designer] Paul Smith’s shopping bags.”

The stripes have also informed Apfelbaum’s new sculptural work, and have now become elements of her fallen paintings. “When I started the monoprints, I wanted to try things I hadn’t done,” she says. “The focus on printmaking took me out of myself—and eventually brought me back.”